

CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

MINISTRY DURING THE CORONA VIRUS EPIDEMIC

MARCH 20, 2020

Dear Bishops, Priests and Deacons,

Further to Archbishop Anthony's Pastoral Letter and the attached Directives, I offer the following thoughts in response to numerous questions received and highlight some points made by the Archbishop. I would also refer you to the Liturgical Guidance that will be sent from the Liturgy Office and to the recent information from Michael Digges in relation to employed parish staff. Advice on all these matters will be updated regularly in the coming days as new questions emerge. Do not hesitate to contact the Chancery or me directly whenever issues arise (0405 358 630).

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. For many reasons – spiritual, pastoral and practical – **we would like Mass to be publicly celebrated in Sydney for as long as this is possible**. Presently we are restricted to indoor gatherings of up to 100 people and outdoor gatherings of no more than 500. While a number of dioceses have suspended public Masses altogether, Archbishop Anthony is asking us to provide Masses as best we can for those in Sydney who would like to attend.

Some people have already decided to stop attending; others may be so inclined as the virus spreads; and some would argue that our frail elderly parishioners, at least, should stay home. It is important for our people to know that in the current situation **the Archbishop is granting to all Catholics in Sydney a dispensation from the usual obligation to participate in Sunday Mass**. In his Directives the Archbishop has proposed some alternative ways by which they might keep Holy the Lord's Day.

2. The general health advice is that **people should avoid public places and reduce any non-essential movement outside the home**. This is especially true for elderly people and those with various health conditions. Obviously, what people regard as essential movement will vary. Some will have to do basic shopping or attend doctors. Health care professionals and people in other essential industries will continue to work. Most school children still go to school. Likewise, many of our parishioners will regard coming to Mass as an essential part of their lives.

As clergy, we are in many respects an "essential service", and fulfilling our ministry will involve some risk at times. We can't sit at home and do nothing for the next few months. Of course, if a priest believes that his health is such that he should not be exercising public ministry at present, then he should not do so. **Our retired priests should be very careful in this regard**. If you believe you need to withdraw from public ministry, please let me know as soon as possible so we can try to make other arrangements for your parish.

3. We fully expect that many people, especially the elderly, will decide not to attend Mass for the time being, and this will reduce the numbers at Mass. We might encourage those who do not attend on a Sunday to participate in a smaller weekday Mass – or you might provide a special mass for your elderly parishioners. Although some parishes have already decided to suspend all Masses, **our Sydney policy is to try to make Mass available for those who judge it prudent to attend**. I know that this policy presents a number of challenges – and I know that some of you have already developed some creative solutions.

SOME PARTICULAR CHALLENGES

SUNDAY MASSES

1. In many parishes Sunday Mass attendance at each Mass is already below 100: these Masses can continue as usual. Please **note the seriousness of the new requirement that indoor gatherings not exceed 100 people** and that they be well spaced. (The penalties for breach of this law are substantial.) It is suggested that people all enter the church through one door only, so they can be counted accurately or that seats be rationed in some other way (e.g. by use of tickets). Note that other doors must remain accessible as emergency exits.
2. In a parish where one of the Sunday Masses might predictably exceed 100 attendees but another Mass would be expected to have considerably fewer than 100, you might **encourage attendees to redistribute themselves across the Masses**.
3. In a parish where a particular Sunday Mass might predictably exceed 100 attendees please **consider providing an additional Mass**. For example, instead of Masses at 8 am and 10 am, a parish might have them at 7:30 am, 9 am and 10:30 am. Alternatively, **a Sunday evening Mass could** be provided. It will be important for masses to be relatively short.
4. In a very large parish, where several Sunday Masses might predictably exceed 100 attendees, there may be limited scope for providing additional Masses. Two Vigil Masses and/or two [Sunday evening](#) Masses may be possible. Some parishes may have resources to **livestream the Mass by video to the parish hall**, thereby splitting the congregation in two; Holy Communion would be distributed at both venues. Others may be able to **hold Mass outdoors**. The last resort would be to cancel all Sunday Masses. **The Archbishop is leaving these decisions to our creativity and prudence**. Priests who have cancelled Masses in their own parish are requested to advise their Dean so that they can assist in other parishes
5. In some parishes it may be possible to cancel the smallest Mass so as to make yourself available to supply an additional Mass in another parish. Priests in larger parishes might also encourage some parishioners to redistribute themselves by attending Mass in a parish with predictably smaller numbers. We ask the Deans to discuss such options within their deanery. I realise that the situation will vary from parish to parish. I know of one parish where the congregation though small is very aged, and where it may not be prudent to celebrate mass.

WHEN CELEBRATING MASS

1. It is recommended that at this time Masses be kept shorter rather than longer. **Social events after Mass should be minimized** if not stopped all together. **People might be asked to spread out around the church** so that they are at least 1.5 metres apart in all directions. The Archbishop's directives also provide for other measures that will reduce the likelihood of transmission of any infection (availability of hand sanitisers, not passing hymn books, not shaking hands at the Sign of Peace, not touching when blessing non-communicants etc.).
2. **Parish collections should not involve the passing of a plate**. If long handled bags are not available, then it may be necessary to have just one collection as people leave the church, with the money divided between Parish and Pastoral revenue according to the traditional proportion in the parish.

3. I think it would be wise during the Eucharistic Prayer to **cover the bread to be consecrated** (except at the consecration of the host) in order to prevent droplets falling upon it.

4. **Communion in the hand has now been mandated by the Archbishop for the ordinary form of the Latin Rite.** I know this creates a difficulty for some people. We must try sensitively to educate our people about the sound reasons for this rule – which is now common around the world. If there are circumstances in which you (or an acolyte or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion) believe you have no alternative but to distribute Communion on the tongue, please sanitise your hands in between recipients. (This might also help people appreciate the rationale for the rule.)

BAPTISMS

1. Baptisms should not be delayed unduly, but should now be held in small groups. **This may require baptizing several babies separately rather than together.** This is an example of where a priest who does not have Masses in his own parish can help out in another. Deans are asked to coordinate this collaboration.

2. The Liturgy Office will provide advice on issues around the Baptism of several children and the RCIA.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

1. General anointing Masses or liturgies are not recommended at this time. However, those who are seriously or gravely ill should be offered this sacrament. If the person is in hospital, then the required protocols should be followed (e.g. gown and mask etc.). **The anointing may be performed with a cotton wool ball, a cotton bud or a glove that is used only once.** For anointings in a home, please follow the normal rules about ‘social distancing’.

2. **If the recipient of Anointing is ill or dying from the Coronavirus, then please follow all the precautions being taken by the health professionals caring for the person.** The hospital will advise you about this, and show you the correct way in which to put on and take the protective clothing. In this way, you should not need to go into quarantine following the celebration of the sacrament. If you are regularly involved in hospital ministry, you may need to be tested for the virus from time to time.

WEDDINGS

1. Many couples are now postponing their weddings, not least because the reception venue is closed. If a wedding does go ahead, remind people that the gathering in the church is limited to 100 people. If they expect more than that, suggest that those more at risk not attend, or remain in the church foyer. As a last resort, the wedding might be held outdoors. Contact the Chancery for advice on this and any necessary permissions.

FUNERALS

1. The restriction of indoor gatherings to 100 attendees may be challenging for some. Please work sensitively with the grieving family and help them identify who should be present in the church and how the attendees might be limited to these. Funeral prayers at the graveside may allow for greater numbers, and people might be encouraged to attend there, rather than at the church.

SUPPORT AND CONTACT

1. It is likely that as the months go by, some priests will contract the virus or be quarantined for some weeks. We need to be ready to support each other and supply the gaps as they arise. The year ahead will be very disrupted and flexibility is called for.

2. It is recommended that commencing this weekend, **you seek the contact details of your parishioners**, especially their email addresses, so that you may contact them over the months ahead. Please include the following Privacy Note on the page where you collect information:

Staying in touch: In this time of the coronavirus, The Parish wants to be able to contact you in order to update you on new regulations, changing Mass times, and ways the Parish can support you during this difficult time. The Parish may also wish to update you on how you can support it financially, particularly if collections are not taken at Mass. We'd also like to let you know about Parish and Archdiocesan news and activities.

Please provide your name, email address and telephone number below if you are willing to be contacted for these purposes. Your personal information will be collected in accordance with the Archdiocese's collection policy which can be found at: www.sydneycatholic.org/terms-and-conditions/#collection.

3. We are developing a WhatsApp group for each deanery. Our Communications team will contact each Dean to assist with setting this up. WhatsApp is an easy to use messaging app for smart phones which allows for quick and easy communication between priests in a deanery in relation to responding to sick calls and funerals (of which there may be many).

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The above is not the last word on these matters, and the situation and the government advice is sure to change in the weeks ahead. Please raise your practical questions with your Dean or directly with Chancery so can develop advice and pass on experience that can be shared across the archdiocese.

With prayers and best wishes at this difficult time,

Gerry

Very Rev Dr Gerald Gleeson,

Vicar General

Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Level 5, Polding Centre, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

tel: +61 2 9390 5185 | **fax:** +61 2 9261 8312

email: vg@sydneycatholic.org